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ABSTRACT

Major issues that must be addressed by colleges and universities that offer Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs on a distance basis are discussed. Three distance MBAs programs currently in operation are also compared: those of Deakin University in Australia, the University of South Africa, and the University of Strathclyde in Great Britain. To provide a quality MBA degree to off-campus students, it is necessary that external instruction and the student learning experience in the key disciplines and functional areas are of a similar standard to that provided in other recognized MBA programs. Another requirement is that subjects of advanced levels are integrated. Since many distance MBA students are employed in managerial positions they can apply what they learn in their studies. MBA courses in the distance mode must address the issues of interaction between staff and students, group interaction between students, and access to library and computer facilities. Information is provided on key structures of the three MBA programs, including the number of staff, first year student intake, and the program emphasis for each year. Entry requirements for the programs are identified, along with student characteristics. (SW)

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OFF CAMPUS MBA'S:

A REPORT ON THREE PIONEER PROGRAMS

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OFF CAMPUS MBA'S:
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I Preamble

Since 1945 the Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree has developed as the major post-graduate management qualification in Western countries. Universities and colleges offer MBA programs in several forms - the most common requiring either regular full time or part time attendance at classes in a campus setting. In recent years there has been a growing market for MBA study among junior and middle management who are either unable, or unwilling, to attend programs offered in these 'traditional' ways. They find lecture and seminar attendance several times a week incompatible with their job demands, family responsibilities and personal study preferences.

In the United States a notable effort to accommodate this group has been made through the provision of 'Executive' MBA programs. These may require attendance at class on one day per week, or its equivalent. In many cases meetings take place on weekends. Residential schools at nominated points in the study program are also a common feature. Writing in early 1983 McCleary (p.22) claimed that approximately 80 U.S. institutions were offering 'Executive' MBA's, and that several other colleges were considering their introduction.

Outside of the U.S. 'Executive' MBA courses are largely unknown. A few established universities have, however, launched programs for students learning at a distance. The probability of other institutions entering the field in the near future seems high. 'Distance learning' MBA programs have a similar student market appeal to the 'Executive' MBA. They may be even more flexible in accommodating study mode preference and time availability among those who enrol.

Institutions which offer study programs in the distance mode face problems in presenting their materials effectively, and in creating a suitable learning environment for students. These are particularly apparent with MBA courses where group interaction plays an important role. This paper reviews several of the major issues which must be addressed by universities and colleges which offer, or plan to offer, a distance MBA.

The next two sections look at how a credible study program can be mounted and what its resource implications will be. This is followed by a comparative analysis of three distance MBA's currently in operation - those at Deakin University in Australia, the University of South Africa, and the University of Strathclyde. The study concludes with some brief comments about the future of distance MBA's.

II Can the Product be Delivered?

Master's programs in management contain a combination of courses in three fields - key disciplines, functional areas, and policy and strategy. The key disciplines include accounting, economics, organisational behaviour, and quantitative methods. Courses in

data processing and the legal framework are also sometimes included with this group. Finance, marketing, personnel management and production make up the normal range of courses in the functional areas of business. Integrative units in policy and strategy usually complete a program.

If one is to argue that a quality MBA degree can be offered to off-campus students, two related propositions need to be sustained. Firstly, external instruction and the student learning experience in the key disciplines and functional areas are of a similar standard to that provided in other recognised MBA programs. Secondly, the integration of subjects at advanced levels is feasible.

An established campus offers a setting which the external presentation of study materials finds difficulty in matching. Since many distance MBA students are employed in managerial positions they do have one advantage - application can go hand in hand with learning of theory. Despite this, MBA courses in the distance mode must address particularly the issues of interaction between staff and students, group interaction between students, and access to library and computer facilities if they are to provide an alternative to on-campus programs. Innovative teaching strategies, aided by modern communications technology and co-operation between institutions provide a key to doing this. It is instructive to consider each of the above four issues separately.

(a) Staff-student interaction

Contact between students and staff can occur in a variety of ways in distance learning programs. Study schools and tutor visits to study groups give opportunities for face-to-face meetings. These can be supplemented by staff being regularly available to give advice to individual students by telephone. Teletutorials which allow voice contact between lecturers and study groups are another possibility, as is video conferencing if facilities and money are available. Computer managed assessment packages such as TIPS[1] offer another alternative to individualise instruction.

Each of these approaches is a partial substitute for the formal class attendance and other lecturer contact which occurs in on-campus programs. Even when they are used it must be acknowledged, however, that contact between staff and student will normally be less in the distance mode. Provision of high quality study guide material for off-campus students is therefore necessary. This should be more comprehensive and helpful to a student than normal on-campus class notes. As well as printed material it may profitably contain either audio tapes or video tapes or both to enhance the learning environment. Additionally it is desirable that, when considering assignment work, instructors fully document their assessments, i.e. provide extensive written commentary to explain marks awarded.

(b) Student-student interaction

Many argue that interaction within study groups is one of the more important aspects of the MBA learning experience. Institutions can encourage this by requiring students to undertake group activities and submit group reports for assessment. Selecting candidates in specific locations with as varied a mix of backgrounds as possible, and formally allocating them to study groups will assist this process.

Students will often find it productive to meet regularly at a mutually convenient time - perhaps on a week night or at some time during the weekend for three or four hours together. Meetings may be in homes, places of employment, or other suitable locations. This parallels a similar process which often occurs in on-campus programs.

The composition of study groups may change during an MBA program. Members may be transferred by their employer to another location. They may change jobs and move to another town or city. Or individual students may proceed at different paces in completing the study program. A country wide network of study groups can accommodate all of this with minimum difficulty. Where international movement of students occurs, study group interaction may not be possible and MBA enrolment might be deferred. Students who live in isolated locations, or in other countries, may partly alleviate their problems by arranging to meet with students in similar situations for intensive interaction immediately prior to or following residential schools.

The thrust of this argument is that interaction within student groups is possible for distance MBA students. Its success depends both on initial selection practice and on student willingness to participate. Once study groups are formed, group coherence and mutual support can be vital in keeping students involved and motivated when studying under difficult and stressful conditions.

(c) Library access

Limited library access can be a particular problem for geographically isolated students. The institution can largely eliminate this by following a series of appropriate strategies. It may, for example, establish reciprocal borrowing rights with other universities and colleges throughout the country. A complementary strategy is to secure large holdings of books for distance courses and develop a system for external borrowers, e.g. overnight parcel service, which will ensure their rapid delivery and return. Authors of distance learning materials can assist by incorporating key reading material with the study guides distributed at the beginning of a course. Where these and other practices are used library access for an isolated distance student will, except for browsing, be approximately equal to that for on campus students.

Library access tends not to be a major problem for the many distance MBA students who work for large companies and have access to their library holdings.

(d) Computer access

The micro-computer revolution in all of its facets has brought easy access to computing within the reach of all students. Personal computers are currently available which allow sophisticated word processing, spreadsheet preparation, and a broad variety of statistical and quantitative analysis at reasonable cost. Each of these applications are important in an MBA program.

While the power of stand-alone micro-computers is impressive, the development of their telephone linking to central university computer systems is even more exciting. It offers the prospect of more direct interaction between student and instructors, between student and library, and of instantaneous communication by electronic mail. Future developments in communications technology seem likely to facilitate this trend.

From this discussion it is clear that there are several ways to alleviate the problems in providing distance students with a suitable 'MBA experience'. Institutions conducting such programs must be innovative and use modern communications effectively. Courses at different stages of the program will require varying degrees of group activity. Hence it may be necessary to supplement the normal learning environment with longer residential school components in later years when integrative units are conducted. Instructors may also wish to meet more intensively with study groups during this period. By suitably combining face to face group activities with well prepared learning materials, a distance MBA program is capable of providing a learning experience which parallels that available in established 'traditional' programs.

III Resource Implications of the Distance MBA

There are major fixed costs in developing and maintaining suitable study materials for distance students. Using a course team approach similar to that of Britain's Open University, it may take as long as six person weeks to develop one week of distance learning material. A semester course of 13 weeks would therefore require the equivalent of a year and a half of one staff member's time. Initial development of a total MBA program may involve a staff of fifteen academics in a management school in more than a year's work each, if the load is equally divided. Subsequent updating of materials at average intervals of two years will add to this burden. The equivalent initial preparation for an internal MBA program will require significantly fewer resources.

When study materials are developed, the costs of running courses seems likely to be lower in the distance MBA than its on campus counterpart. Identifiable savings will arise because there is

less need for the campus facilities which on-campus students require, i.e. lecture theatres, accommodation, student unions, library reading space, sporting facilities, car parking, gardens and so on. While institutions should allow for budgetary items to cover tutor visits to study groups, telephone, teletutorial and mailing charges, and residential study schools, these are unlikely to be excessive in their magnitude.[2]

While it may be possible to develop quality distance study materials more cheaply and just as effectively without using course teams the argument seems convincing that fixed costs will be higher and variable costs lower in servicing external students in comparison with their internal counterparts. To be viable distance programs should, therefore, be capable of attracting a large number of qualified applicants. They should probably also have larger class sizes than corresponding on-campus programs. The three case studies in the next section reflect on the issue of resources, as well as reporting how each respective institution has developed its MBA program in innovative ways.

IV Three Programs

At the beginning of 1985 there appeared to be only three recognised universities offering MBA programs in the distance mode.[3] The pioneer in the field is the University of South Africa (UNISA) which began offering its Master of Business Leadership degree in 1965. The School of Management at Deakin University introduced its external MBA program in 1981. The University of Strathclyde mounted Britain's first MBA in the distance mode in 1983.

UNISA, Deakin and Strathclyde are very different institutions. Founded in 1873, the University of South Africa offers its wide range of programs only to external students. More than 55,000 students were enrolled in UNISA courses in 1982. Deakin University, founded in 1976, is Australia's youngest university. While much of its development thrust has been in providing high quality study programs to off-campus students, it also has responsibilities in providing on campus courses to service its region. Of the 6350 students enrolled in Deakin courses in 1983, almost two thirds studied in the distance mode. Although the University of Strathclyde was established in 1964, the history of its antecedent institutions began in 1793. Its major reputation is as a technological institution, with the Business School being founded in 1964. Student enrolments in Business degree courses in 1983 exceeded two thousand, from a total student enrolment of about seven thousand in the university.

Against this background let us consider each of the three established programs in turn.

(a) UNISA's Master of Business Leadership (MBL)

Because of South Africa's political isolation the Master of Business Leadership offered by the University of South Africa in Pretoria has not received the recognition that it

might otherwise have claimed. The program is taught over four years. It consists of five discipline based courses in the first year, five courses in functional areas in the second year, and three courses in business policy and strategy in the final two years.

Entry to the MBL program is open to all candidates who possess a recognised Bachelor's degree (or its equivalent), three years appropriate work experience, and who agree to join a study group consisting of a minimum of five persons. The average annual first year class is 250 students. Because entry is 'open', the rate of attrition in the first year approaches 30 per cent. In later years it declines to about ten per cent.

The large majority of students reside in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging region, i.e. about 80 per cent of students live within 80 km of the campus. There are also study groups in the major cities of Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth, in several isolated mining centres, and in the neighbouring countries of Zimbabwe and Namibia. The average entering age of students was 30 years in 1984 - a significant fall from the situation ten years earlier. Nearly all students are employed in the private sector. Civil servants seeking professional graduate qualifications appear to favour study in Master of Public Administration programs offered elsewhere.

In addressing the issues of interaction among students, and between students and staff, and computer access, the School of Business Leadership has developed several interesting policies. Students must attend two one-week study schools in Pretoria in the first, second and fourth years of the program, and one in the third year. These include lectures, seminars and case studies. Attendance is compulsory[4]. In addition, lecturers formally visit single or combined study groups at least once during every course. As already stated every student must belong to a study group. The School encourages active membership of these groups by setting several group assignments in each course. There is no present requirement concerning the ownership and use of personal computers by students. Academic staff do, however, encourage their use in problem solving.

In the MBL program Professors are responsible for the production of study materials. These appear in typed study guides and lecture notes. The School of Business Leadership does not use the course team approach practised by the Open University. There are, however, discussions of course content among staff and normal academic cooperation and team work in developing learning materials. A summary of the features of the MBL program appears in TABLES 1, 2 and 3 where there are comparisons with Deakin and Strathclyde.

(b) Deakin University's Master of Business Administration

Since it began teaching classes in 1977 a major thrust at Deakin University has been towards serving distance

TABLE 1 KEY STRUCTURES AND PROGRAM STRUCTURES OF THE DEAKIN MBA, UNISA MBL, AND STRATHCLYDE DISTANCE MBA PROGRAMS - 1984

	Deakin	UNISA	Strathclyde
First offered	1981	1965	1983
No. of staff in school*	22	46	154
First year student intake	60	250	100
Minimum normal completion time	4 yrs	4 yrs	4 yrs
Program Structure			
Year 1	Disciplines	Disciplines	Disciplines and
Year 2	Disciplines	Functional areas	Functional areas
Year 3	Functional areas	Integrative	Integrative
Year 4	Integrative	Integrative	Integrative
Number of courses	16	13	10
Tuition fees	Nil for Australian Residents $11,600 for others	R1960	£2300

*All staff are not involved in servicing degree programs.

TABLE 2 ENTRY REQUIREMENTS AND STUDENT PROFILES FOR THE DEAKIN MBA, UNISA MBL, AND STRATHCLYDE DISTANCE MBA PROGRAMS - 1984 ENTERING CLASSES

	Deakin	UNISA	Strathclyde
Entry requirements			
(a) Bachelor's degree (or equivalent)	Yes	Yes	Yes
(b) Minimum work experience	2 years	3 years	4 years
(c) Graduate Management Admission Test	Yes	No	No
(d) Agreement to join study group	Yes	Yes	No
Entry for eligible candidates	Selective	Open	Selective
Student Profiles			
Average age at first year entry	33 years	30 years	34 years
Males	85%	90%	90%
Females	15%	10%	10%
Employment			
- Private sector	51%	80%	75%
- Public sector	49%	20%	25%
Location	Sydney 17% Melbourne 25% Other cities 33% Provincial 25%	Pretoria - Witwatersrand - Vaal triangle 80% Other 20%	Greater Glasgow 37% Rest of Scotland 35% Other U.K. 23% Overseas 5%

TABLE 3 DETAILS OF INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH FOR THE DEAKIN MBA, UNISA MBL, AND STRATHCLYDE DISTANCE MBA PROGRAMS

	Deakin	UNISA	Strathclyde
Production of study materials	. Course teams	. Professors	. Lecturers and course developers
	. Typeset study guides	. Typed study guides and lectures	. Typed study guides
Staff-student Interaction			
Study schools - location(s)	1 per year various	1-2 per year Pretoria	2 per year Glasgow
Visits to study groups	Most courses	All courses	Some
Teletutorials	Some courses	No	No
Other	. Telephone, mail . TIPS	. Telephone, mail	. Telephone, mail
Study Groups	Compulsory	Compulsory	Optional
Library access			
- Rapid delivery systems	Yes	No	No
- Reciprocal borrowing	Yes	No**	No
Computing			
Personal computer	Required	Encouraged	No*
Access to university's mainframe	No	No	No
Course Assessment	Varies between courses	Varies between years	Varies between courses

* Access to personal computer required for computing elective.
** There are UNISA branch libraries in several main centres e.g. Cape Town, Durban.

students using the approach of the Open University in Britain. The MBA program was Deakin's first program at the post-graduate degree level. It consists of sixteen equally weighted semester units which a student will normally complete in a minimum period of four years. There is an emphasis on key disciplines in the first two years and on the functional areas and integrative courses in the final two years.

Candidates for admission must have had at least two years of work experience, and possess an undergraduate degree (or its equivalent). They must also submit scores for the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). In 1984 there were 389 applications for the quota of sixty places in the first year. Successful applicants have been both highly qualified[5] and well motivated. Because of this attrition rates have been less than ten per cent per annum in each year of the program.

Forty percent of the new class in 1984 resided in either the Sydney or Melbourne metropolitan areas. These two cities contain about forty per cent of Australia's population and each is served by two or more institutions which offer MBA degrees in a more traditional format. A third of the 1984 entrants lived in other cities including Canberra, Geelong, Adelaide and Newcastle. The remaining twenty five per cent were located in provincial and country locations. At 33 years the average age of new Deakin students was significantly higher than their UNISA counterparts. Unlike UNISA almost one half of the class worked in the public sector. The Master of Public Administration degree is not offered widely by Australian universities and hence civil servants tend to be attracted to MBA programs when aiming to advance their management training.

Interaction between staff and students takes several forms in Deakin MBA courses. There is one compulsory residential school each year. In years one and two this takes place over a weekend. In years three and four the meeting period is a week. Tutors visit study groups for mid-semester meetings in most courses. In some courses lectures have also used teletutorials as either a substitute or complement to these visits. There is also widespread use of telephone communication as well as occasional on-campus consultation between staff and visiting students. Another experiment of note has been with TIPS, the computer managed assessment package.[6]

Deakin has followed the UNISA practice of allocating students to a study group early in the first year. While there are not such rigid requirements regarding the minimum size of these groups, or about compulsory membership in later years, they operate successfully in most cases. When a student moves from one location to another, the School reallocates study group membership. Compulsory group assignments in most courses stimulate student interaction within each group.

The Deakin University library has ensured improved library access by offering an overnight delivery system free of charge to its distance students. There is also a widespread network of reciprocal borrowing practised among Australian universities and Colleges of Advanced Education. In addition to this Deakin study guides contain several key readings to encourage students to read as widely as possible.

One distinctive requirement for all students enrolling in the Deakin MBA is the need to have access to a computer for course exercises in the final three years of the program. Initially the School of Management offered a purchase or lease arrangement on microcomputers to assist each student in this regard. Dramatic changes in the availability, capacity and prices of personal computers reduced the need for this support. Students seem likely to gain on-line access to the University's central computer via telephone line linking of their micro-terminals in the foreseeable future.

In production of study materials course teams, rather than individual members of academic staff, are responsible for the final product. Each team consists of two or three academics and a professional course developer. When there are gaps in a team's expertise it is common practice to engage outside authorities to act as consultant writers of relevant course modules. The course team approach faces some problems in ensuring the consistent production of learning materials. It does, however, provide a fertile environment in which critical comment will improve the impact of learning materials.

(c) <u>The University of Strathclyde's Distance MBA</u>

The Strathclyde Business School offers its MBA program in three forms - to full-time on-campus students (since 1966), to part-time on-campus students (since 1975) and to part-time students at a distance (since 1983). Syllabuses and examinations are the same in each course.

Unlike the Deakin and UNISA programs in which each student takes all of the core courses, Strathclyde students must complete only four of six foundation classes. The six foundation classes - Accountancy and Finance, Economics, Management of Human Resources, Manufacturing Management, Marketing and Quantitative Methods - cover a range of key disciplines and functional areas. In approving each individual program the Course Supervisor endeavours to ensure that each student will broaden his or her knowledge base. Repeating of classes in the MBA which replicate undergraduate study is not normally acceptable. Students complete the four foundation classes during the first half of their four year program. In the third year there is a compulsory course in Business Policy together with four elective classes. The final year is devoted to a project report.

To be eligible for admission, candidates must have a Bachelor's degree from a recognised university (or its equivalent) and four years work experience. During the 1983-84 academic year the School admitted almost one hundred students to the distance MBA. Selected students were able to enrol both at the start and during the academic year. The majority of this first year class resided within the Glasgow or Edinburgh areas. There were also significant groups in Aberdeen and Dundee. University authorities endeavoured to limit entry to residents of Scotland in this first intake.

In a similar way to Deakin and UNISA, the Strathclyde Business School nominates tutors in every course. Each student must maintain contact with this person during the year and can discuss progress and problems with them. The other major form of staff-student contact is the Weekend School. These take two forms - Skills Development Schools and Instructional Schools. Each student must attend all of the Skills Development Schools during the study program. In 1984 these covered four fields - Business Games, Personnel Selection, Computing and Introductory Business Policy. Instructional Schools consist of lectures and seminars in specific courses which students often find difficult, e.g. Quantitative Methods. Attendance at these Schools is optional. All Weekend Schools take place on the Strathclyde campus in the centre of Glasgow.

While Strathclyde encourages student interaction through the formation of local study groups which meet regularly, membership of these groups is not presently compulsory. The School does, however, make additional study materials available to the groups and arranges for staff visits to them where the costs are reasonable. This makes them more attractive than they might be otherwise.

Although each student must attend one Weekend School on computing during the program, there is no other formal course requirement at present regarding access and use of computers. In this respect the Strathclyde approach is similar to that at UNISA and rather different from that at Deakin. Since there are eight universities and several polytechnic institutions with business programs in Scotland the potential of reasonable library access for distance students is good. The Strathclyde University Library does not currently have a rapid delivery system in place for distance students.

In concluding this section it is informative to make a brief comment about fees and costs. The tuition fees for both the UNISA and Strathclyde programs (R1960 and £2300 respectively) go part of the way to covering the costs of mounting and servicing each. Large student classes also help in this regard because the lower marginal cost of additional students decreases average cost. At Deakin there are no tuition fees and the class is small. The Australian public is paying the cost of a program which may be more expensive to operate than either its South African or Scottish counterpart.[7] The possibility of fees and an increased class size at Deakin cannot be dismissed under different political circumstances.

V The Future

Recent developments in communication technology suggest a growing potential for home based tertiary study in many fields. Graduate management education is one of these. As video-cassette recorders, microcomputers and telephone computer linking fall in price opportunities for innovative and effective MBA programs for distance students will grow. While entry by an institution into the field involves considerable expense, student demand is currently high, and there are opportunities to apply new and proven teaching and learning strategies to provide graduates with a credible qualification. The pioneering programs at UNISA, Deakin University and the University of Strathclyde attest to this view.

Future developments in 'traditional' MBA programs may involve universities adopting technologies which accommodate students operating more from their homes. Distance MBA programs must continue to pay particular attention to the key issues of interaction between staff and students, and in student groups. In both situations academics will have to change and adapt in a dynamic environment if they are to provide a product which is appropriate to meet the challenges which face the modern manager.

References

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Footnotes

1 TIPS is the acronym for the Teaching Information Processing System package developed by Kelley at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960's. It has been used at more than 100 universities for on-campus students. Maxwell (1984) reports a pilot application with students in an economics course in the Deakin MBA program.

2 Students will incur a majority of telephone charges. Their attendance fees may also cover much of the cost of residential schools.

3 Several other universities have shown interest in offering programs in the future. These include four British universities - Aston, the Open University, Heriot-Watt and Brunel - Athabasca University in Canada and Stellenbosch in South Africa.

4 The School of Business leadership brochure for 1984 (p.6) states 'Attendance at all the study schools is compulsory, but exemption from attendance at the study schools can be granted by the Director of the School of Business Leadership in exceptional cases'.

5 Although only one of the selection criteria used, GMAT scores provide an indication of this. In 1984 the median GMAT score of successful applicants was in the 91st percentile, and of all applicants in the 69th percentile.

6 Maxwell (1984) Op. cit.

7 Associate Professor Robert Gibson estimated an average tuition cost at 1983 prices of $A8000 per student in the Deakin program, using official university financial data. The marginal cost for each additional student appeared to be about half this amount - up to an intake level of 120 per annum.